

anticuados pertenecen los charlatanes, los profesionales de la labia, como Doncel Medano, que solían frecuentar las ferias pueblerinas del noroeste anunciando a voces sus mercancías. Luis Mateo Díez confiesa tener siempre mucha afición a este tipo de personajes capaces de embaucar al oyente, embelesando a la vez la chata realidad circundante. También intervienen en estas historias los viajantes de comercio por la provincia de León, como Elicio Bieito, cuya suerte depende de lo que dicen y de cómo lo dicen.

Pero este libro, cuyo autor cede de vez en cuando la palabra a las voces directas de sus paisanos, en su afán de emular la fascinación de la palabra y su poder de encantamiento no se enfoca exclusivamente en la palabra dicha sustentada en la memoria y la voz, sino que también rinde tributo al verbo escrito de los primeros libros secretamente leídos en la infancia en el desván de la vieja casa municipal donde el autor había nacido. Un recuerdo melancólico evoca los libros requisados por el régimen en los precarios y sombríos años de la posguerra, como *Corazón* de Edmundo de Amicis, un libro que había desvelado para el autor y su hermano menor Antón todo un misterioso y seductor poder de la palabra escrita, proporcionándoles por primera vez la lectura más intensa que resultó en lágrimas de placer y fascinación.

Con *Las palabras de la vida* Luis Mateo Díez, uno de los mejores escritores españoles del momento, hace poco ingresado en la Academia, nos expone de manera sistemática y bella las claves definitivas de su mundo personal y literario, ambos fuertemente unidos. Sin duda, el lector no se sentirá decepcionado y podrá disfrutarlo dejándose fácilmente seducir por la palabra del sabio contador que nos enseña deleitando.

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Mendoza, Eduardo. *La aventura del tocador de señoras*. Barcelona, Seix Barral, 2001, 350 pp.

*El Tocador de Señoras* is the third in a series of novels (the first two are *El misterio de la cripta embrujada* and *El laberinto de las aceitunas*) narrated by an unnamed protagonist, entrapped within a complicated web of theft and murder that places him at its center, both as suspect and amateur detective, this second a necessary role he needs to play in order to save himself from arrest and reincarceration in the insane asylum to which he has inevitably returned at the end of the first two novels. It is a novel that can be read in one long sitting, a characteristic of Mendoza's writing that pleases many. In fact, the novel comes across as a long standup comic routine, replete with some extremely funny one-liners. It is also very tongue-in-cheek at times, and these two comic veins form a contrast with the more general slapstick, vaudevillian humor that runs

throughout the narration. If one were to seek sources for this novel, other than the two works mentioned above, it would make sense to turn to the absurdist discourse of a writer like Miguel Mihura or the detective fiction (here parodied) of Manuel Vázquez Montalbán. In fact this definition of Mendoza's work —Vázquez Montalbán couched in the theater of the absurd— is what makes most sense to this reader.

The first novel in this series, *El misterio de la cripta embrujada* (1979), actually reads more like a comic strip than a work of the absurd. Things happen that have no rhyme or reason, such as a character's appearance in the narrator's hotel with no justification, and scatological references are gratuitous. As the plot develops, the narration becomes more sophisticated and invites the reader to question how narratives are formed. A clear example of this would be a long internal narration recounted by another character, which the narrator then dismisses (in direct discourse with the reader) with a simple sentence. Despite these digressions towards metafiction, however, the narration is still based chiefly on humor, and owes no particular debt to coherence. Fortunately, *La aventura del tocador de señoras* will be much more respectful of rules of narration. This is not to say that it is a fault to be unrealistic in a parody such as these novels, but one finds the reading experience much less frustrating when one is not constantly surprised by narrative implausibilities in a work that, even when absurd, purports to maintain a certain realistic basis.

The second novel is *El laberinto de las aceitunas* (1982). The narrative pattern is the same and once more there is an abundance of one-liners and scatological references. Again we may speak of a parody of a classic pattern: the mischievous young woman who is, underneath, a good soul, and her possible amorous alliance with the detective. The narrative is somewhat more coherent in its spatial movement, and there is even a very humorous leitmotif with regard to the narrator's problems maintaining himself clothed. The conclusion leaves quite a bit to be desired, however, and seems to be a simple formula for bringing the text to a close.

*La aventura del tocador de señoras*, while still suffering from the very superficial nature of this series, is the most developed of the three works. The characters are better formed, the plot is more coherent, and the author is much more successful in connecting his ironic humor to a worthy referent, the suspicious combination of politics and commerce in the Catalan capital. The inclusion of the theme of immigration, in the person of an African accomplice and his Dominican girlfriend, helps to place the work in a contemporary setting.

Mendoza works from two valuable strong points. One is his wit, and the other is his impressive knowledge of the Spanish language. The timing of his jokes is generally perfect. His fluid (albeit not simplistic) syntax makes for comfortable reading, and his vocabulary stretches from humorous slang expressions to vivid description and clear dialogue. This novel, like its two predecessors, is obviously an aside for an author who

has produced more serious and critically acclaimed works (and even in his humorous vein a more serious social statement: *Sin noticias de Gurb*), and the repetition of structure and plot with regard to the earlier works can be tedious for a systematic reader of Mendoza. In the first two novels, the protagonist, unnamed (a characteristic perhaps taken from Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*), is liberated from his insane asylum (one wonders if Mendoza has seen episodes of *The A Team*) in order to help solve a crime. In this novel, he is simply set free, but the basic structures of the first two novels will be repeated. The not so innocent damsel in distress appears as usual, with the comically unconsummated love affair that was one of the few subtleties of the previous works (although one quick tryst in *El laberinto de las aceitunas* reverses that motif momentarily), and the dialogue, sparked by the well formed and at times elegant language of a character who by no means should possess that discursive ability is fortunately also repeated, fortunately because this last characteristic is perhaps what makes reading these three novels most enjoyable.

Towards the end of the novel, the same information is repeated several times by many of the characters involved. Given the fact that Mendoza is an accomplished writer, the reader must necessarily ask why the author would risk leading his reader on a possible path of boredom or frustration. Critics have often portrayed Mendoza as one of Spain's premier postmodernists, and one might ask if the technique of repetition here constitutes a postmodernist and metafictional parody of the classic detective tale alluded to above (Hammett's *The Thin Man* is the best example); here the suspects, gathered together, rather than simply listening to the detective, perhaps defending or pretending their innocence in short retorts, repeat, once and again, the very same information, as if they had not heard the previous speaker, thus creating a comic routine that undercuts a climactic scene whose burgeoning seriousness would have changed the tone of the novel at its moment of highest suspense.

Once having reviewed this work as a parodic detective novel, one might look further into the question of its value as literature as such. The detective novel genre was not invented to compete with authors such as James, Melville or Conrad as far as philosophical, moral and ethical statements are concerned, but in authors such as Chandler and Hammet, one still finds a definite and pointed commentary on the corruption of politics and the upper class. Vázquez Montalbán is very similar in his adaptation of the genre to Catalan society, but it is difficult to consider Mendoza on a par with his Catalan compatriot, even though his novel's villains come from the same upper bourgeoisie as Vázquez Montalbán's (the fact that they are Catalan, however, is almost meaningless in this work; if one were to ignore a few lines, literally, the novel could take place anywhere). The novel's thrust is basically that of humor, and the plot and characters are vehicles toward that end. As light enjoyment, the novel succeeds very well. As an attempt toward serious literature, whether in

the postmodern mode or any other, it does not, and one wonders when Mendoza, who enjoys a well deserved reputation for novels such as *La verdad sobre el caso Savolta* and *La ciudad de los prodigios*, will understand this fact and decide to put his anonymous character and his travails to rest.

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Felipe Benítez Reyes. *Escaparate de venenos (1996-1999)*. Barcelona, Tusquets, 2000, 174 pp.

Este nuevo libro de Felipe Benítez Reyes reúne poemas compuestos entre 1996 y 1999, agrupados en nueve secciones que emulan literalmente escenas de la vida interior, expuestas a modo de escaparates a la mirada del lector que recorre el poemario. Un Prólogo y un Epílogo inauguran y clausuran una textualidad desencantada y amarga, que enlaza con el ritmo pausado de la elegía las pasiones, los momentos, las experiencias de un vivir cotidiano, irreversiblemente urbano y contemporáneo.

En un deliberado gesto de complicidad con el lector Benítez Reyes abre su obra con la advocación de cuatro epígrafes (Marianne Moore, Lewis Carroll, Gonzalo de Lerma y Jules Laforgue) que convocan la imagen que da título al libro, verdadero leit motiv de este canto: el «veneno». El lector se ve arrojado a un ácido inventario de las pasiones humanas, que socavan como serpientes la utopía luminosa de la vida. Y en el centro de ellas, la meditación sobre el tiempo construirá un andamiaje conceptual que emblemáticamente convertirá los poemas en pequeños sorbos del veneno más cruel: el sinsentido existencial, la vorágine de la nada amenazando la memoria.

Una mirada entre alucinada y perpleja emerge desde un yo que se escamotea ante el lector, que cumple su rol de guía frente a este desfile de fantasmas, bufones, túneles abiertos en la noche y dioses inmisericordes. Si desde el prólogo el poeta nos invita al ejercicio inevitable de la memoria es para desnudarnos la imagen de un tiempo «como un perro que huye / enseñando los dientes» (13), tiempo que fatalmente «perdió su eternidad» (13).

La operación discursiva que hegemoniza el discurso reside en este letánico y mortal asedio a los fantasmas de un tiempo implacable, que transforma la vida en un «raro correr hacia la nada» (170), a pesar de que al final, en el poema titulado «Propósito de enmienda», ensaye una retracción «a favor del vivir —sea eso lo que sea—, / retando la locura del tiempo fugitivo» (169).

Las nueve secciones, numeradas y sin título distintivo, recorren los escenarios urbanos de una vida vuelta hacia su interior, empecinada en